

## Dancers' health case studies

“The proposed Pilot scheme and ambitions for the National Institute are timely, critically needed and visionary. As an important national touring company based away from the capital and touring extensively throughout the UK and beyond, we are constantly balancing the monetary, artistic, health and pastoral needs of the company in its broadest sense. Our dancers are our life blood, they are our advocates and our voice, they perform but also teach, whilst also spending many hours crammed in a touring van. Here in Leamington we have some good general physios and practitioners, and we have had to build our own portfolio of support to turn to in the inevitable cases of injury. We are also within reach of Birmingham so can use the services of the Jerwood Centre in extreme cases. Despite investment in dancers' insurance, and a keen eye on injury prevention through massage and clear training techniques, and despite the skills available locally, injury is a problem deeply compounded by overstretched resources, busy schedules and no understudy provision. Dance UK is shouting loudly about the needs of our dancers but in general they are invisible once they leave our stages. They deserve optimum healthcare at all times.”

*Louise Richards, Executive Director, Motionhouse*

“My back injury was many many years ago. I think it really developed out of my Graham classes way back at Middlesex. Just constant lower back pains that I had to live with as I could not afford treatment. What I eventually did was give up Graham. Many years later after my studies, I think it was a car accident that sparked off the same weak lower back problem. I was then doing quite a bit of work for the British Olympic Association as movement teacher / choreographer for skiers and skaters, and so I took advantage of that. I was treated at Northwick Park [the Olympic Medical Institute] and got a lot of help and felt very confident knowing there was a sports team who were specialists in their field and could easily understand what my problem was and what I needed to recover physically and mentally and manage it. I recall having physio, but also speaking to a psychologist about the trauma of the accident. It was very helpful.”

*Jeanfer Jean-Charles, choreographer*

“The [briefing] paper is very good, and exactly right on the facts.

I have had to get this injury treated privately, but was very lucky to at least get two consultations and the MRI scan costs paid by Duckie [a show]. The surgery was private, as was the physio and of course there is the cost of not working prior and post treatments.

I use The Jerwood Centre, but the costs [of private treatment] are pretty prohibitive to most freelance dancers.

This is the case for most contemporary dancers outside of the large companies, and it is fantastic that you are trying to address this.”

*Rosie Kay, dancer and choreographer*

“I have been working as a professional dancer in the UK since 1999 and have experienced working as both a freelancer and a full time company member.

During the first few years of my career I was seldom in a financial position to seek professional treatment for injuries, and regular treatment for general body maintenance was an unobtainable luxury. These rare appointments were usually used as quick fix solutions and I would be reluctant to pay for any follow up or long term care.

From 2003-06 as a member of Random Dance I was in the extremely fortunate position of having BUPA health insurance provided by the Company. For the first time it became possible to receive free regular treatment for the prevention of and rehabilitation from injuries.

As part of this commitment Random also formed a strong relationship with Sports and Spinal Clinics who became familiar with both the work and the dancers. Following individual self assessments each of us became more aware and informed about our own particular areas of weaknesses; more educated about how to take responsibility for them. I think I can speak on behalf of all the other dancers in saying that this was hugely valuable to us and was a fundamental contributor to our health and maintenance – we are a pretty fit and happy bunch. Together both the dancers and the Company have realised the benefits of prevention over cure.

Now that I am returning to work as a freelancer I will be leaving the security of BUPA behind as it is impossible for me as an individual to meet the costs. While I do now feel better equipped with the tools I need to maintain a healthy balanced body, nothing will replace the comfort I had of knowing that the financial support was there, should anything go wrong. Paying £50 for a quick fix physio appointment is one thing, facing £2,000 for a knee operation is another.

I'll be going back to keeping my fingers crossed, hoping for the best and doing my rehabilitation exercises religiously.”

*Hilary Stainsby*

“There is a huge need for access to dance related medical practitioners. As a professional ballet dancer I have experienced treatment with both specialised dance therapists and also with people with no prior experience or knowledge in dance.

My experience has been that when being treated by the practitioners with no dance background the treatment is often not exactly what you need e.g. diagnosis seems to take longer due to having to explain basic technique. When explaining it only hurts when you do a specific step you are met with a blank expression!

You often want to know if you are going to do any more damage by dancing on it if you work through the pain to get you through the season, these people are not used to this concept and are dubious to say either way.

I cannot emphasise enough the benefits of having medical practitioners with dance knowledge and background. The life of a dancer is so intrinsically woven around their bodies so when they are not 100% it affects them on so many different levels not only physically but very often when injured a dancer's confidence is greatly affected and can be for along time after the initial injury has gone.”

*Victoria Willard*

"When I was dancing with Random, we were covered by a health insurance policy. This meant I had easy access to medical support in case of an injury. A doctor's note was required, followed by a quick call to the insurance company, who issued an authorization number over the phone. It was a fast way to receive treatment and appropriate rehabilitation.

I believe all companies should consider this kind of policy, to ensure dancers are in optimum health and fitness. This holistic approach means dancers get a quick diagnosis, and spend a lot less time out of the studio."

*Claire Cunningham*

"Dancers are elite athletes with extreme specialist skills and we expect them to operate at their optimum at all times. However, in my experience as a dancer, the greatest difficulty for company dancers came when they needed to get back into shape before a rehearsal period. This was particularly due to high gym membership costs and resulted in a struggle for dancers in the first few days back in the studio, even though they had done technique classes in preparation. The impact for the company was that the director/choreographer would be unable to do his work properly as he needed to wait for the dancers to return to physical best.

Now as an Associate Director, I can see and understand why dancers come back on contract after 3 weeks holiday having lost most of their cardio-vascular stamina. There is nowhere for them to go and be supported by dance specialists in an environment where they can keep up their fitness levels and have quality time working and investing in injury prevention techniques before they start back in the studio. There is then the risk of losing valuable rehearsal time with a huge risk of unnecessary injury.

Dancers who are on freelance contracts simply cannot afford to pay gym membership. In my opinion, it is stamina that tends to be lost quickest. Classical and Contemporary technique trained dancers will not lose their technical ability within a short period of time, but the fitness will go. Therefore, access for professional dancers to the best facilities and expertise, included as a part of this fantastic scheme, would ensure they have some means of protection from injury when they return to work, and also allow them to return to the studio in peak physical condition, allowing for a better use of the precious resources of the company – their dancers."

*Odette Hughes, Associate Director, Wayne McGregor | Random Dance*

"I was delighted to read the article in The Dancing Times about the [Dancers Health pilot] scheme and I think it's well overdue. I can echo the problem about needing immediate, effective treatment in order to keep working. I recently had a shoulder injury and went to my GP who said she would organize physiotherapy, but I didn't hear from them for 6 months!

I am a Moves Fitness instructor (aerobic dance) and we seem to fall through the middle between dance and sport. I'm sure there a lot of instructors who work independently or with small companies such as myself, who would appreciate being involved in such a scheme as the cost of private treatment is prohibitive. We need to keep working not only for ourselves, but for the general public who are our students. I would also like to see such fees as tax deductible as, according to my accountant, they currently aren't. Our bodies are our living and I feel we should be able to claim as if we were say taxi drivers who have to get their vehicles serviced and repaired.

The last point I would like to raise is that of aspiring dancers (like my son) and sportspeople. My son is lucky enough to be in the Royal Ballet Associate programme and so has very limited access to physiotherapy, but I have had to pay for private treatment at the same rate as an adult for him as any injury needs to be resolved quickly. The youngsters are the future of dance and sport and I feel that extending help to them, or more accurately their parents, could be a long term goal of such a scheme."

*Sue Thomas, Moves Fitness instructor*